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PANPSYCHISM

T.L.S. SPRIGGE

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Panpsychism is the thesis that physical nature is composed of individuals each of which is to some degree sentient. It is somewhat akin to hylozoism, but in place of the thesis of the pervasiveness of life in nature substitutes the pervasiveness of sentience, experience or, in a broad sense, consciousness. There are two distinct grounds on which panpsychism has been based. Some see it as the best explanation of the emergence of consciousness in the universe to say that it is, in fact, universally present, and that the high-level consciousness of humans and animals is the product of special patterns of that low-level consciousness or feeling which is universally present. The other ground on which panpsychism is argued for is that ordinary knowledge of the physical world is only of its structure and sensory effects on us, and that the most likely inner content which fills out this structure and produces these experiences is a system of patterns of sentient experience of a low level.

1 The nature of panpsychism

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1 The nature of panpsychism

Through prejudice and misunderstanding, panpsychism is often thought a somewhat fanciful doctrine, thus commentators often try to save some admired master from association with it. Consequently, an uncontroversial list of panpsychists is problematic. Especially debated is the case of Spinoza, and there is some argument too over Whitehead, though certainly many process philosophers working in the Whitehead and Hartshorne tradition are panpsychists. Other thinkers either committed, or strongly inclined, to panpsychism include Gustav FECHNER, R.H. LOTZE, Friedrich Paulsen (d. 1908) William JAMES, Josiah ROYCE, C.H. Waddington (d.1975) and Charles Hartshorne. LEIBNIZ, SCHOPENHAUER and BERGSON advanced positions akin to panpsychism.

Panpsychism is expressed somewhat variously in virtue of differing usages of such words as 'consciousness', 'sentience', 'feeling' and 'experience'. Here we shall use the word 'consciousness' taken in a very broad sense. (Readers may mentally substitute 'sentience', if they prefer, provided they do not understand this purely behaviourally.) Any individual such that there is a truth *as to what it is like to be it* (in general or at some

particular moment) is conscious, and its consciousness is what that truth concerns I may have limited power to grasp what it is like to be you, but I cannot seriously doubt that there is something there to be right or wrong about, as sensible people think also true about animals (except perhaps the very simplest). But if I try to imagine what it is like to be this table here everyone will agree that there is nothing there to be imagined.

The point is not that one's conscious states must be like something, must have a character; that is true of everything. But things do divide, in common opinion, into those such that there is and those such that there is not *something that it is like to be them* (though this expression is only an idiomatic pointer to something it requires a certain sophisticated obtuseness to be unable to identify).

The paradigm panpsychist maintains that each of the ultimate units of the physical world (whether particles, events or even mutually influencing fields) out of which all other physical things are made, are conscious in this sense. Of course, they are not self conscious, or thoughtful, but each has some dumb feeling of its own existence and of its exchange of influence with other things. It does not follow, they will rightly insist, that every physical thing is conscious. Many things, such as sticks and stones, made of these ultimate units are not so. Thus while a stone will be composed of conscious units without itself being conscious, a waiting human brain will both itself be conscious and be composed of what is conscious, perhaps at two levels (for example, the neurons in the brain may be individually conscious and also made up, like everything else, of ultimate physical units which are so). Hence panpsychism, as such, leaves open the question as to which individuals above the minimal scale are sentient and which not, though particular systems of panpsychism may have their own suggestions as to how this can be decided. (Some think an element of behavioural spontaneity is its chief external mark.)

2 Arguments for panpsychism

The first argument for panpsychism is that it can around the best account of how something so apparently novel as consciousness could have arisen within a physical world whose development has otherwise been simply a re-arrangement of the homogeneous. One theory based on this argument is that the experience of those non-ultimate units in nature which are conscious are literally composed of the experiences of their ultimate parts. Thus my experience consists in the experiences of my neurons (and those of the experiences of their ultimate parts) which unite in a way in which the experiences of the parts of non-conscious things do not. Thus nothing essentially novel has come into the universe with human or animal consciousness, only new solidifications of the consciousness (sometimes, called 'mind dust') already pervasive in the universe.

This is not a very satisfactory view. For consciousness seems to exist only in distinct individual units or 'centres', and it seems doubtful that these can combine to make more comprehensive ones. Even if this is not in principle impossible (and some panpsychists have reasons for thinking it possible in principle), introspection of our own consciousness hardly suggests that any of its components have a distinct sense of their own being.

However, there are various ways in which the theory may be made more promising. Perhaps it is a law of mental nature that when conscious individuals form a system of a certain type, that system becomes conscious in its own right so that its behaviour is due to a combination of the mental states of its parts and its mental state as a whole, without the latter strictly being composed of the former. If so, the emergence of high-level consciousness like ours is due to laws concerning the 'charge' of consciousness associated with matter in general rather than the result of its purely physical character, and thereby seems more intelligible.

The panpsychism we have considered so far implies no particular view of the nature of physical reality. It simply holds that each ultimate unit of the physical world has a certain 'charge' of sentience, which is additional to its physical characteristics, and that in certain circumstances more complex units of nature receive their own individual 'charge' of sentience too.

The second argument for panpsychism favours the different conclusion that consciousness is the real 'stuff' of the physical universe (though this may be further reinforced by the first argument). It starts with the claim that, metaphysics apart, we only know the structure of physical things as such (and of the physical world in general) and their sensory effects on centres of consciousness like ourselves — identified as the consciousness pertaining to certain complex physical things similarly specified — not the content in which that structure is realized concretely. Thus our knowledge of physical reality, so far as it goes beyond characterizations of things simply as the cause of certain sensations in ourselves, is rather like the kind of knowledge of a piece of music which someone born deaf might have from a musical education based entirely on the study of musical scores, such as could lead them to play (perhaps somewhat lifelessly) compositions on the piano without having any idea of the specific quality of heard sound in general or of the particular sounds currently being produced.

It being acknowledged that (metaphysics apart) we only know the structure of physical reality (or only the structure and the experiences it produces in us), a speculative mind will wonder whether its qualitative nature must remain entirely unknown. They will reflect that there is one kind of thing, after all, of which we do know the inherent quality, namely our own consciousness and, by inference, also the consciousness of other humans and to a limited extent animals. In short, we know the generic nature of consciousness and a good deal about the specific forms it can take. Moreover, we are incapable even of conceiving in any genuinely full way any thing more than a mere abstract structure (needing to be embodied in something more concrete to exist) which is not a form or a content of consciousness. (This is an essentially idealist claim which cannot be examined here: see IDEALISM §2.) Could this be because what we call the generic essence of consciousness is in fact the generic essence of all possible fully concrete reality? If so, the reality which produces 'perceptual' experiences in us, and the structure of which science (and less precisely, common sense) aspires to formulate and control, must somehow be composed of consciousness. This is at least a hypothesis worth exploring as the only alternative to saying that matter is unknowable in its inner essence, and as likely also to cast light on the mind-body or mind-brain relationship.

3 Consciousness in panpsychism

But how can consciousness have that kind of structure? The simplest hypothesis is that there are innumerable interacting centres of consciousness which are the inner being of nature's ultimate physical units; that there are definite lines of possible influence between them, either connecting them immediately or through 'intervening' ones; and that the 'geometry' of these lines is more or less adequately represented by what we conceive of as their spatial or spatiotemporal relations (or those of complexes including them), while a description of any particular physical process is thus a purely structural account — supplemented by an indication of how it is liable to affect our own perceptual experiences — of the way in which these possible influences have become actual.

However, there are various alternative paths which an attempt to understand the world panpsychistically may take. In particular, there are alternative accounts of how the over-all or dominant consciousness of a human being (such as is calling itself 'I' when one speaks) or animal fits into the scheme. The hypothesis just described suggests that the laws which govern the interaction of such a dominant centre of consciousness with the lower-level centres of consciousness which constitute its body, and via that with other things, are distinct from those which govern those interactions between lower-level centres of consciousness which constitute more 'purely physical' processes both within its body and in nature at large. This has a certain kinship to dualism since, though mind and matter are ultimately the same kind of 'stuff', fresh laws of interaction apply where centres of consciousness of a higher level than those present throughout nature come into operation (see DUALISM §5). Also it is likely to conceive the spatial location of such a dominant centre of consciousness as more diffuse than that of the physical units corresponding to the centres which it dominates. (In principle, it can recognize wholes other than animals with a similarly dominant consciousness diffusely existing within them.)

However, other forms of panpsychism try to fit our consciousness into a world of interacting centres of consciousness whose structural description remains solely that of universal physics. These have some kinship with 'double aspect' conceptions of mind and brain. Various further versions of panpsychism are possible too, all sharing the claimed advantage of conceiving the mind-brain relation as a relation between things which are of the same generic kind. Actually, panpsychists have tended to develop their theories on the basis of an event or process ontology rather than that of individual continuants which endure through a certain length of time, so that for them the natural world in its inner being consists of innumerable streams of interacting experience rather than of interacting sentient continuants. Panpsychism is also sometimes associated with some form of absolute idealism according to which all things are included in one all-embracing consciousness in a manner which displays itself as their containment in a single spatiotemporal system.

References and further reading

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Royce, J. (1892) *The Spirit of Modern Philosophy*, New York: W.S. Norton & Co., 1967. (In chapter 12 Royce distinguishes between the world of description and the world of acquaintance. The second, which is mental, is the inner essence of the former, which is the world as viewed by science.)

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